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AND HOME IS THE HUNTED

Prudencio de Pereda

I THOUGHT, if I could only get some spirit and heart into me. I would suddenly stop feeling this damned tired way. I could do this thing, then. I could do it! I could do it, and, at last, something that I did would have a meaning. Something of mine would be important. It would matter! At last! At last!

And then, suddenly and quickly, as soon as I had stopped thinking this and saying it to myself once or twice and clearly, the tired feeling that had made everything before seem unimportant and listless and not to matter, began to go quickly away, and soon it was gone.

I shaved and washed and put on my cleaned, pressed suit, and then I put the pills in my pocket just before I went out.

This morning Violet and I had quarreled again. I thought of it now when I saw the dollar she had thrown at me lying on the table. I went to pick it up, but then I stopped and thought: I've got just enough carfare to go there. I can walk the bridge. I won't take the dollar. That will separate me from all that.

I went over to New York by the long, round-about way in the El, up to 59th Street and the river. And then I took the elevator up to the walking level of Queensboro Bridge and walked over to Welfare Island through the air.

In the Island bus, we drove slowly along the shore road. The driver very carefully and expertly avoided the slow-moving patients who crossed the road in wheel chairs or walked along it at the side. I looked out the window and saw the bitter faces and the drab uniforms. When the driver called out: "Cancer and Neurological Hospital," I got off. Emma was in the Cancer wing.

The sun had been out in the morning, and so the beds were outside now. Emma's bed was at the side of the yard and in the "shade" of the second story porch. I went right up to it. She did not see me until I was at the head of it.

"Hello, Emmy!" I said. I laughed loudly to strike her happily at the first. She turned her head slowly, smiling already at the sound of the voice and the laugh. "Hello, Mickey," she said. She held up her hand to me.

"How are you?" I said. I said it very lightly and loudly. She was pale and looked very bad, and she was lying very flat on her back without a pillow under her head.

"All right," she said. Then, "Fine! I'm all right." She said this slowly. "How are you?" She was still holding on to my hand and was trying to stretch her head over to the side of the bed. To look for a chair for me, I thought.

"There was a chair there," Emmy said.

"That's all right, Emmy. That's okay! I don't want to sit down. I've been sitting all the way coming over. I'm tired of sitting."

"No, no! Sit down. There's one over at the back. It must be there, I think," she said, and I looked and saw a white hospital chair back of the bed and against the wall. I brought it out to the side and sat down. While I was getting the chair I had to let go of her hand.

"How's Violet?" she said now.

"Fine! She's fine," I said. "Still having trouble at the Press, but they'll let up soon, I think."

"They will," Emmy said. "They always do in the end. They have to."

"Surely," I said. "They always do. But if they could only see that all of this terrorizing that's so stupid and rotten is no good, even for them. . . . Is Joe coming over today?" I said. I wanted to change our thoughts. Joe was her husband. He was the one friend for whom I had a genuine feeling and admiration, and she was his young and pretty wife and had cancer of the hip. She had been operated on six months ago in a private hospital for cancer of the breast. The ailment of the hip, then, had been diagnosed as a broken bone, but it had really been the source of the cancer that was working its way up her body, now.

All of this had taken the little money that they themselves had and all of the money that their family and friends would pleasantly spare. She said, "No. He was here yesterday. He'll be down on Friday."

"Oh."

"He wants to come every day, or every other day, at least, but I want him to stay home and do some work." Joe was a painter. He was on the WPA.

"What's he doing now?"

"He isn't doing much outside of his work for the project. He says he can't get into anything big. Some original work that he could do something with."

"Like the Rabelais illustrations?"

"Yes, like that!"

"He was doing some illustrations for the *Odyssey*, wasn't he, Emmy? I remember that they seemed pretty good."

"I know, but he can't get on with it. That's what he feels," she said. She spoke in long, drawn-out jerks of words, as if she were drawing each breath and then using it quickly in speech.

"Are the kids still with your mother, Emmy?"

"Yes, Joe can feel easy about that, anyway."

"I know. So can you. That's damned good for all concerned, I think. But he worries like hell about you."

"I know it," she said. She turned her head slowly away from me for just a moment. Then, "Everybody does," she said slowly.

"Except you," I said. I laughed a little.

"No, I don't worry. I know what's the matter with me. You don't worry about something you know definitely."

"No. You don't. That's a good thing about it. You can start from there."

"Start from where, Mickey?"

"I mean you begin to do things now. You know what's what and where you are. It's like a fighter who's in the ring. The fight's started already and you've lost all the worry that you had about it before. You're not nervous anymore. You see, Emmy? You know where you are and what you have to do."

"Yes, what you have to do."

"Well—to go on. You advance from there. You have to! You know what I mean, don't you, Emmy? You move. Life goes on. See?"

"Yes, I think so."

"I mean, it's better to know what's the matter. Then you can start getting better. You know?"

"Getting better?"

"Yes, getting better! Everyone can get better. Everyone who's alive can go on. They go on naturally and they can improve. Life grows on itself. No matter how bad off you are, keeping alive is getting better sometimes."

"Yes?"

"Yes, Emmy. But, anyway, isn't this a hell of a lot better than having a terrible pain always with you and not knowing what it is at all? You have terrible fears about it, and it gets bigger and bigger and more important to you all the time. When you find out the truth, no matter how bad it is, your fears are stopped anyway. You have the decision of certainty. You can go on from there. You can die, or you can survive. You have to make a choice, then. Don't you?"

"I think so, Mickey," she said. She smiled.

"What are you laughing at? What's the matter, Emmy?"

"I was just thinking. You've changed your tune, haven't you? How different from the last time! You're among the uplifters, now, eh? Even you can get healthy."

"Emmy!" I said. "Look!"

"You, too, Brutus!" she said. Her eyes looked wet.

"Emmy, I was only fooling! I was only fooling, kid. I was just kidding myself. I was trying to be honest and make one more damned, stupid try, anyway; but I haven't changed. I haven't! Listen, Emmy, I brought the pills. I have them here with me, now!"

"I didn't think you believed those things. Thanks, anyway, for trying."

"I don't believe them! I can't believe them! What the hell is the use of suffering, of any suffering? Life is bad enough when you feel well and happy, sometimes. There's always something waiting around the corner to get you down, then."

"Yes, but you can be a realist. You can look at those things. And see them. Then you fight them. You can make it better. You can! You were right when you were saying those things. You really can win against them sometimes, but you don't believe it. You don't believe all those fine things you were telling me. None of the uplifters do. None of them really believe them. They say them because they think they're helping me. But I believe them. That's the joke of it! They'd be so surprised if they knew that I had any hope."

"Yeah, hope! You can win, too, Emmy! Sure, Emmy! You can fight like hell all the time and live two or three years of a lousy, tortured existence, and then die, anyway."

"But you have lived, and you've fought!"

"For what?"

"For that little bit, anyway," she said. She looked away from me

again. Then, when she turned her head back, she said, "You sound very depressed, today. Unusually so."

"I wish I had your physical basis for dying. I wouldn't hesitate a minute, damn it!"

"Is it so hopeless? With you, I mean?"

"It's lousy!"

"Your writing bad?"

"Well, I can't get much of it done. It doesn't seem bad, but the little I do only seems to appeal to me. Nobody will publish it."

"They will. And soon! And they'll write to you and ask you if you've got any more stories at home. You wait and see."

"I'm waiting because I have to, but I don't believe that. I don't really believe it, Emmy. That's just a dream. I'm waiting because I can't do anything else. When my wife gets wise to me, I'll have to really do something, but I'm too lazy to start anything on my own pull. So I just keep this dream."

"Oh, no, it's not a dream! You're not dreaming. You know that the better a writer is, the longer it takes for him to catch on. And a lot of the right people have liked your work very much already. You know that."

"Yes, so it seems. And it's a damned grateful thing to me," I said. "Incidentally, you and Joe have been very nice to me there."

"Not nice, just fair."

"Yes, too fair, I think. But that's all right. You see, all this about a struggling young writer who's looking for new modes of expression and things like that is swell for a guy if he's alone. If he can live alone and support himself, you know. But when you've got a wife who married you in the first place because she believed in you, who took you on for a year or so, so that you could have lots of time to work in and money to live on, and who seems to be getting just a little bit tired of it now; just a little bit, you know, and you can't help feeling this—then, it isn't so good.

"You love her, you know, Emmy. I love her. I'm sure of that! But it doesn't seem to be enough. There have to be a lot of other things, little attentions, little gifts, little favors, and things like that. Women seem to expect these things. I've thought about it and I think it's only fair, but writers can't do these things—especially when they're working like hell, and thinking all the time, and worrying about why their stuff doesn't take. You have no time. You have no money! Then,

of course, if you don't do these things, you're selfish. Very selfish! So I'm beginning to convince myself that I'm a very selfish guy."

Emmy did not say anything. She had lain quietly, listening to me shoot off my eager mouth like that and now I watched her for a moment. I did not like to look at her too much. She moved in the bed suddenly and her mouth twitched.

"What's the matter," I said. "Pain?"

"No. Not too much, anyway. It's just my physical basis for dying acting up again."

"Is it very bad, Emmy?"

"Yes."

"Please forgive me for talking like that. Jesus! I should be trying to make you feel good and here I am shooting off my mouth and handing out a lot of crap. On two visits in succession, too!"

"Oh, that's all right. You're honest, anyway. It's just the pain getting bad. I had a very bad night, yesterday. But that's not it. . . . Did you talk to Violet about this, Mickey? About giving me a good end, I mean?"

"No."

"You didn't tell her?"

"No, I didn't, Emmy. I wanted to do it completely myself, alone and well. I didn't think she could understand, anyway."

Emmy smiled slowly. "She would understand it. I understand it, even though I don't agree with you."

"Do you, Emmy?"

"I do, Mickey."

"Did you tell Joe, then. I mean that you know what it is, now?"

"What?"

"That the cancer's gone all up your back from the hips to the back, and that that's what the pain in your neck is?"

"No! No, I didn't tell him."

"You're not going to tell him you know?"

"No. Why should I? He thinks I'm not worried and it makes him feel better." She had been talking very slowly before, and in jerks, but now she talked even more slowly and it seemed to hurt her to talk.

"And you're not going to do anything about it, Emmy, then?"

"No," she said. She moved her head slowly from side to side. "No." Then tears began to well up from her eyes and stream down her cheeks. I put my hand on hers.

"Emmy! What's the matter? Is it the pain again? Am I . . . ?"

"No, no! Not you! You're all right. You're fine. Honest! It's the pain, the physical. . . ."

"Emmy, look! Look, kid. Life is a hunt! This life is nothing more than a god-damned hunt. We're being hunted and we'll always be caught. All the time! Look at the people in Czechoslovakia! They tried with all their might and guts to get away, but they got caught in the end. We always get caught. Look. . . ."

"Look at the people in Spain and China. There! They fight against it," she said. Her mouth blubbered a little with the tears in it. "They're not caught." I put my handkerchief up to it and she shook her head slowly from side to side to say, No, and took it in her hand. She wiped her eyes with it.

"They're not caught. Much! Is that life? But you can beat them, Emmy. You can get away from their pain."

She shook her head again like that. Her mouth said, "No!"

"Emmy, get away. You'll just go to sleep. You won't have any pain. You'll just go off to sleep without feeling anything. You'll just go off—and you won't have any dreams. That would be enough inducement for me—Jesus, no dreams! Emmy, take the pills, kid!"

"No," she said. "No! I want to fight! I've been fighting all the time; all my life. I can't stop, now. I want to fight!" She closed her eyes. Two tears pushed out over the lids. I looked away. I did not think that she wanted me to see her crying. I looked out over the river to the big, magnificent buildings of the Medical Center. On the river, the tugs went swiftly past, disdaining all of this. The sun was up again, on the top of the big buildings, but not on the river, now. In those buildings, I thought, there must be thousands of men and women working hard to discover cures for all known diseases—especially cancer. I looked back at Emmy on the bed.

She held the handkerchief to her mouth and her eyes were still tightly closed. The two tear drops stood poised on her eyelids. She was resting now; sleeping, maybe! She'll be getting strength to wake up again and start to fight all over. Start right away to fight again with her little, little strength!

Begin another day of watching people come to pity her—to pity her for just a polite moment, and then run away from this dreary hole. Fast!

Another day to eat three meals in and throw up two!

Never see the children! You never see the children. She doesn't want her children to come and see her fight the losing fight!

I moved my leg suddenly in anger, and it struck the bed. Emmy gave a little jump and opened her eyes. "I'm sorry, Emmy," I said. I put my hand on her shoulder. She turned her head slowly to look at me.

"Heh?" she said. Her eyes were bright with wetness.

"I woke you up," I said.

"Oh, no. No. That's all right. I shouldn't be sleeping. I won't sleep, tonight."

"You don't sleep at night?"

"Not too much," Emmy said.

Then, we did not say anything for a while. I was looking out across the river. She must have been watching my face, because when I turned around she was looking at me. She smiled a little.

"Nothing doing on that, then, eh, kid?"

She shook her head slowly and smiled.

"Okay," I said. "Then, we'll begin all over, just as if I was making an ordinary, healthy visit. How are you, Emmy? Really, how are you?"

"Fine," she said.